The Reaper

Gerard Fairlie

BY

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NON-REFERT

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I

From well within the shadow of the trees, the man looked up the long straight drive towards Carshalton Hall. He remained absolutely motionless, staring through the darkness of the night at the gaunt silhouette of the grand old building.

It certainly presented a most imposing spectacle, the dark, stately outline shown up in bold relief against the moonlit sky. But the man in the wood had no interest whatever in the beauty of the scene before his eyes: he was watching, watching intently for signs of life, for a light at any rate at the windows. He intended reaching that house, getting into it. And he did not want to be disturbed.

Abruptly he made up his mind. No light was to be seen, nothing had happened in the few minutes that he had been watching to suggest that anyone was still about. He began to move forward stealthily, always keeping within the black shadows of the trees. He moved very carefully, heedful to make no noise, but this caution delayed him. He took some time to cover the few hundred yards which still separated him from his objective.

He found himself at last at the very edge of the belt of trees. He looked around him, doubtful as to the best method of covering the short distance which still remained. It was all lawn, a flat open space in which no cover could be hoped for. On each side this lawn continued as far as he could see, giving no hope that further round he might find a less exposed approach. He decided that he must risk being seen from the house, a risk which the prevailing darkness and the lateness of the hour did much to mitigate.

He walked across. He did not run, although the temptation to do so was strong upon him. But he knew that if anyone were watching, to run would be to advertise the fact that he had no business to be there. As he walked across the lawn this thought made him laugh quietly to himself.

He reached the shadow of the great house, leant up against the wall and for a moment stood stock still, listening.

No sound came to his ears, however. He breathed a sigh of relief. He was forced to admit that the short walk which he had just completed had taken more out of his stock of nerve than he had bargained for.

In direct contrast to his previous caution he now worked quickly,

although he was careful still to be absolutely silent in all he did. A few steps brought him past the massive front door to a window. Here he stopped, and applied a gentle pressure on the framework. Satisfied evidently by what his touch had told him, he withdrew a small instrument from his pocket. Under his expert persuasion, the lock soon opened.

Very carefully he pushed back the window until it was possible for him to pass through. Swinging one leg over the windowsill, he clambered noiselessly into the room.

He found himself in a little alcove, screened from the rest of the room by a thick curtain. One end of this he lifted cautiously, only an inch or so from the floor, but this small action told him all that he required to know. The room beyond was in complete darkness.

He stepped through the curtains, and looked about him.

He could see nothing, for the curtains effectually prevented any of the moonlight outside to penetrate. Taking a minute electric torch from his pocket, he switched it on.

II

Professor Oliver Weir looked around him. The small study was overcrowded, but it provided the greatest privacy and had therefore been chosen from all the other rooms of Carshalton Hall. On his right sat the new baronet, elder son of his old friend Sir Everard Peregrine; on his left the deceased baronet's sister, Mrs. Norton. In other chairs sat the two other children of Sir Everard, Guy and his sister Joan, and in the far corner their cousin Mark Thorold.

Weir looked thoughtfully at the sheaf of papers in front of him.

"Lionel," he said, "I think we can dispense with the rather dismal business of reading the will. I will give you a copy and you can peruse it by yourself. I propose merely to tell all of you here the more important points which do not concern Lionel in particular. Does that meet with your approval?"

Sir Lionel Peregrine nodded. Weir continued at once.

"The house and everything appertaining to it of course goes to Lionel. Just before your father died I am speaking to you, Guy, and to Joan now he sold securities to the value of fifteen thousand pounds and converted the money into bearer bonds. These bonds are mentioned in the will and are to be divided between you two, the younger children's portion in fact. But, and this is the strange thing, these bonds were not deposited at the bank and I cannot find any trace of them. Nor can I find any trace of a safe in this house."

He paused and looked around him rather nervously. The old man realised that this news must come in the nature of a bombshell, particularly to the two people most intimately concerned.

"What!"

It was Guy Peregrine, rather flushed in the face, who had let the exclamation escape him.

"I cannot believe that we shall not find them," went on Weir quickly, "but in the meantime I am sorry to say to both of you, and to you, Lionel, that you will have to rely on Lionel for funds. You can of course treat the matter as a loan until the bonds are found. It is a most odd thing, and I have communicated with the solicitors, but they are unable to help me. Apparently your father sold the securities without their knowledge."

“But it is ridiculous, Oliver,” Julia Norton broke in.

“These things must be found. Does no one else know of them?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“We shall start a search tomorrow. Don’t you know of any safe in the house, Lionel?”

Sir Lionel Peregrine looked up with a start. He had scarcely been listening to the conversation, deep in his own thoughts. Now he caught his Aunt’s eyes and held them as he answered:

“I never heard my father speak of any safe in this house.”

Julia Norton frowned impatiently.

“But your father spoke to you about these bonds?”

“Never. He never discussed business matters with me.”

Mrs. Norton restrained with difficulty a violent desire to express her approval of her brother’s conduct with regard to his son. Then she turned to her niece: “You can come and stay with me, Joan dear, until this matter is settled up satisfactorily.”

The girl smiled.

“Thank you ever so much, Aunt Julia. But I think I ought to be here to help in the search.”

She laughed rather ruefully.

“Are we ruined, Mr. Weir?” she asked.

The old man shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

“No, my dear, of course not, of course not! The bonds will turn up all right, don’t you worry. Only it may take a little time to find them. You and Guy must exercise a little patience, that’s all. And Lionel will be generous, I have no doubt.”

He looked rather apprehensively at the young man sitting on his right, noted the weak face and the clothes which were almost too well cut, realised that the girl could scarcely trust her brother very far. Of the younger brother Guy he gave no thought. Guy was similar to Lionel as he knew well, similar in character although perhaps more dissolute in

habit. The thought struck him that it was strange, very strange, that two such worthless sons had been born to that great gentleman their father.

Then once more he thought of their sister Joan, and a warm glow seemed to come over him, refreshing as the scent of some sweet flower after a storm. She had all the virtues of her father, all of them and more. The frail beauty which was hers was not skin deep; every delicate feature, so pleasant to the eye, had its counterpart in her character.

Joan Peregrine was beautiful with a loveliness which was greater than mere prettiness, and Weir reflected rather sadly that, since the estate was entailed in such a manner that it could never be inherited on the female side, she the only worthy child of her father, was for ever prevented from being the mistress of Carshalton Hall.

“Is there anything else?”

It was Sir Lionel Peregrine who had so rudely disturbed his thoughts. Weir started rather guiltily; he had almost forgotten the business of the moment in his reverie.

“Nothing out of the ordinary.”

Guy laughed, but there was no humour in the sound.

“All the same,” he said, “I think it’s quite enough to be getting on with. Do I understand, Mr. Weir, that until these bonds are found, Joan and I must live on the charity of Lionel?”

“That is so.”

The youth laughed again, drily, and got to his feet.

“Well, I’m for bed. It’s very late already. If you will grant me the privilege of using my own room for a little longer, Lionel, I will do my best to find that safe.”

His brother looked up quickly.

“Of course you may stay, Guy. As long as you like.

But you speak very glibly of a safe. Are you sure there is one?”

“Fifteen thousand pounds is a lot of money. Do you think it likely that Father would have left it lying about for any prying eyes to see...and

keep. Remember they are bearer bonds."

Julia Norton also rose from the armchair in which she had been sitting.

"I must say I think there's a lot in that," she said, "and I agree with Guy that it is quite late enough for us all to be in bed. After all, we can't do anything more tonight, can we, Oliver?"

Weir smiled.

"I am glad you are taking it so sensibly, Guy. No, we can do no more tonight. Tomorrow we shall start an organised hunt through the house for these bonds."

He rose to his feet and gathered the papers on the table in front of him into one neat pile. As he picked up the last, however, he held it in his hand for a moment, a frown on his forehead.

Suddenly he made up his mind, and turned to Lionel.

"Your father told you the story of the Reaper, of course?"

"The Reaper? You mean the tale of the bell?"

"Yes, but the story of how the legend came into being?"

"Oh, Mr. Weir, is there a legend?" Joan Peregrine, unable to withhold her curiosity, had burst into the conversation.

"I always thought that it was just a silly story."

Professor Weir looked at her for a moment without replying. Then he made up his mind.

"There is certainly a story. I confess I am surprised that your father never told you. I think every member of the family should know what is after all a very interesting piece of folk lore. It won't take me long. Shall I tell you now?"

Sir Lionel got up from his chair.

"By all means, but I have a suggestion to make first. This is not a private matter, is it? Let's move to the hall where we can all be comfortable and not cramped for room as we are here. We might also have a little refreshment before we go to bed."

“I told Thomas to leave out some drinks in the hall,”

remarked Joan.

“That settles it, doesn’t it?”

The house party moved into the hall which was found to be in darkness. The lights were turned on and chairs were drawn up near to that occupied by the Professor.

Drinks having been provided, Weir was about to start his tale when Mrs. Norton stopped him.

“Just one minute, Oliver. It’s extraordinarily cold, isn’t it? Are all the windows shut?”

Mark Thorold, nearest to the outside wall, jumped up.

“I’ll see.”

He walked over to the curtains and drew them aside.

“These are all right.”

Turning to his left, he crossed to the other curtains and looked behind them.

“Yes, there’s one open here. Thomas must have forgotten to shut it.”

He closed the window and returned to his seat.

“Thank you, Mark.” Mrs. Norton settled herself comfortably. “Thomas is getting very careless nowadays. The worst of it is that one does not like rebuking old family servants. Well, Oliver?”

The Professor lit a cigar before replying. When it was drawing to his satisfaction he looked up at his little audience.

“I shall always remember when your father first told me the story, Lionel. One evening, after we had dined together alone, he retired from the dining-room and returned with an old document. This he handed to me to read without a word of explanation. Although I have a wide experience of old documents, it took me all my time to read this one, and when I had done so eventually the story that I had deciphered was a very curious one.”

He paused for a moment and gazed meditatively at the end of his

cigar.

“It is known as the story of the Reaper because that document is supposed to have been written by your ancestor whose picture that is hanging over the fireplace.

The Reaper, as he was called, was the first owner of this place which seems to have been the apple of his eye. From what one can gather the estate became to him a sort of symbol of all that was worth living for. He must have been of a slightly fanatical turn of mind for none dared to interfere with his administration of the place and the legend tells us that even the representatives of the crown were terrified to go to him in order to collect the taxes which he was expected to pay. One day, just before it was time for the corn to be cut, he was riding round his fields and suddenly came across a man who was cutting the ripe corn with the evident intention of stealing it. A violent altercation took place between the pilferer and the infuriated baronet; the man dared to be rude, even abusive, whereupon the Reaper, snatching from the man’s grasp the sickle with which he had been cutting the corn, made a wild sweep at him and striking the fellow on the neck nearly severed the unfortunate man’s head from his body.”

Mrs. Norton’s rather pert voice broke in on the narrative: “I am quite convinced I should have disliked that man.”

Weir smilingly continued:

“Naturally this act caused the greatest indignation in the district, but the fear in which your ancestor was held, combined with the fact that he was known to hold the Queen’s favour, prevented any action being taken against him. The story ends by saying that towards the end of his life he repented of this act of violence and in the manner of those days decided to make what reparation he could. He gave considerable alms to the poor of the district, and caused a chapel to be built in which prayers were to be said for the repose of his soul and that of the murdered man. This chapel actually was built, but was destroyed during the Reformation and the site is unknown. The legend is that when the head of the house is about to die, a bell, the bell of this chapel, is heard tolling faintly in the distance.

There was quite an appreciable pause after the Professor had completed the tale. Then Joan laughed suddenly.

“You’ve made me feel quite creepy, Mr. Weir. Has anybody ever heard the bell. Did it sound the other day?”

Weir smiled at the girl facing him.

“My dear, you know what these stories are. Needless to say I have never heard it, and I don’t suppose anyone else has for that matter. Most old places after all, have just such stories attached to them, and although in certain cases unusual, even eerie things do happen, there is no reason to attach any belief to this one. But as folk lore, a subject which has always thrilled me so much, they are undoubtedly interesting.”

“I should have said,” put in Mrs. Norton drily, “that as a bedtime story this one is much too apt to provoke a sleep-less night. I’m surprised at you, Oliver. Fancy telling us a story like that at this time of night. Well, I’m going to bed.”

She rose from her chair, and moved towards the stairs.

Lionel followed her.

“May I have a word with you, Aunt Julia? In private?”

Mrs. Norton turned and looked at him. It struck her that at that moment her nephew appeared even more repellent to her than usual, even more of the effeminate than normally.

Mastering her aversion as much as she was able, she did her best to conceal any hint of it in her voice as she replied: “At this time of night, Lionel? Won’t it keep until tomorrow?”

“I’m very sorry,” Lionel’s voice was short. “In point of fact it’s a matter of some importance.”

“Oh, very well, very well.”

Lionel preceded her to the door of the study, and held it open for her. Mrs. Norton, feeling rather annoyed at again being baulked of her rest, sat down in the only armchair.

“Well?”

“It’s about Joan.”

“About Joan? What’s the child been doing now?”

“Of course you’ve already noticed it?”

“Noticed it? Oh, of course I have. Noticed what? Do be explicit, I’m

not a thought-reader, Lionel."

Mrs. Norton could not prevent a hint of annoyance creeping into her voice. It was bad enough, she thought, to be kept up at all hours of the night without her nephew beating about the bush in this manner.

Lionel frowned.

"I mean the way this fellow Thorold hangs about her continuously. He never allows the girl out of his sight, When I came in this evening he was trying to propose to her on the staircase."

Mrs. Norton sat up suddenly.

"On the stairs? Are you sure? What a funny place to propose!"

"I fail to see anything humorous in it at all," Lionel spoke irritably. "I trust that you won't either when you have considered the position with deliberation. Personally I think it would be a most undesirable marriage for Joan. The man hasn't got a penny!"

"He's a distant cousin of yours, Lionel. And he is working anyway. As you know he is Oliver Weir's secretary?"

Lionel laughed derisively.

"Earning a salary of about two hundred a year!"

Mrs. Norton looked up sharply. Something about her nephew always irritated her, always succeeded in making her angry.

"You're a gross materialist, Lionel," she said, striving to keep her voice on an even keel. "I know perfectly well that marriage entails many expenses, but if people waited for the ideal marriage the race would very soon die out! When I got engaged to my own beloved Henry we loved each other but he hadn't any wordly [sic] goods to endow me with. Of course he had his brains."

"Perhaps he didn't endow you with those."

For a moment Mrs. Norton could scarcely believe her ears. An almost overwhelming desire to assault her nephew came upon her, but by a superhuman effort she retained control of her frayed temper.

"You forget yourself, Lionel," she said coldly. "Personally I like Mark. I'd much sooner that Joan flirted with that sort of man than with one of these modern fashion plates. I should like to see Joan marry Mark,

and you may be quite sure that if she wants to, she will quite regardless of whether you or I or anyone else approves or not. I must say that I admire her spirit."

“Aunt Julia, I do wish you’d …”

He got no further. Mrs. Norton was now thoroughly worked up. She had resented being delayed from retiring to her bed in the first place, and she had resented her nephew’s attitude throughout the interview even more. But once started it was not in her character to stop until she had said all that she intended to say.

“Late marriages may be all very well for middle-aged men who waddle in Mincing Lane and think of money first and Life’s sacred ties as an after-thought.” The words came out with a rush, effectually silencing Lionel’s attempt to speak. “But that sort of arrangement is no good for women, especially good-looking ones.”

Mrs. Norton rose from her seat majestically.

“No, Lionel, all that you have said only persuades me that it is an excellent thing for these two young people to see as much as possible of each other. Don’t interrupt me! Whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder!”

Lionel rose to his feet. He was slightly flushed, but other-wise he gave no sign of the fury which he felt. He spoke quietly, but his voice sounded cold as ice: “I think it rather premature to say that the Almighty has joined them.”

Mrs. Norton stopped dead in her stately progress to the door.

“That doesn’t matter,” she said acidly. “I feel sure He intends to.”

Smiling to herself at this rejoinder, which rather pleased her, Mrs. Norton made her way back to the hall. All the lights were out and the room was deserted. Assuming that all the others had already retired for the night, she made her way across the room by the light of the fire which was burning merrily. She reached the foot of the stairs and started to ascend.

When she was half way up Mrs. Norton stopped abruptly and stood motionless, listening. She heard nothing. Puzzled, for she was almost certain that some sound had attracted her attention, she remained for a second undecided whether to renew the ascent or return to the hall and investigate.

Very faintly at first, but suddenly gathering volume with every moment although never loud, a sound not unlike that of a bell tolling

in the distance came to her ears.

For one long second Mrs. Norton remained where she was, transfixed with horror. A short sentence, spoken only a short half-hour before, jumped to the very forefront of her mind. The words rattled in her brain, forced themselves upon her violently against her will: “The legend is that when the head of the house is about to die, a bell, the bell of the chapel, is heard tolling faintly in the distance.

Involuntarily Mrs. Norton threw her hands up to her ears and closed out the hateful sound. She felt faint, and swayed slightly. She put one hand out to the banisters to prevent herself from falling. At once she heard the sound again.

It was very faint now, seemed to be a long way off. Mrs. Norton tried to scream, but no sound came from her throat.

Suddenly she lost all control. With a muffled shriek she rushed up the stairs and along the passage to her room; she threw herself on the bed just as she was and buried her face in the pillows.

III

Guy approached the study door silently and listened. A light was showing under the crack of the door, but he could hear no sound of voices. For a moment or two he stood motionless, lacking the moral courage to face the coming interview with his brother which he knew would be unpleasant.

He considered the situation for a moment, mentally rehearsed what he would say in a few seconds. The interview was of immense importance to him, and if he could conclude it successfully would take a great load from his mind. Abruptly he made up his mind and turned the handle of the door.

He saw his brother sitting at the desk with his back towards him. Guy looked round the little room and saw to his relief that Lionel was alone. He shut the door behind him.

Lionel looked round quickly at the sound. From the expression on his face Guy rather wished he had chosen a more opportune moment than this for the interview; his brother was evidently annoyed about something, for he was scowling in a most unprepossessing manner.

“Aunt Julia gone to bed?”

He asked the question lightly, as if he had come in on no particular business. He lit a cigarette casually, and sat down in a chair.

“Yes. She left a few minutes ago.”

There was an awkward pause. Guy, uncomfortable, could not make himself meet his brother’s eyes. He sensed rather than saw that Lionel was not deceived, realised something was in the air.

“Well?”

The question was rapped out, almost imperious in its demand for an answer. Guy looked up.

“Lionel, there’s something I want to talk to you about.”

“What is it?”

“It’s rather hard to explain. I…”

Guy was feeling supremely uncomfortable. Hostility seemed to fill the

air of the small study, seemed to be forming a barrier between himself and his brother. He cursed inwardly that his luck should have brought him to Lionel just at this time.

“I well, I was wondering if you could possibly let me have a small advance. To be paid back as soon as the bonds are found, of course. You see, I ..."

Lionel cut him short with a movement of the hand.

“Horses or women?”

Guy sat up in his chair, and a certain rise in the colour of his face betrayed the fact that the gibe had got home.

“I don’t see why you should jump down my throat like that. As a matter of fact, it’s got nothing to do with either horses or women.”

“Cards?”

“Yes.”

“Where? Your club?”

“You’re damned inquisitive, aren’t you?” Guy laughed nervously. “If you must know, it wasn’t at the club. I was playing at a friend’s house.”

Lionel smiled, but it was a mirthless smile.

“I learnt never to play cards for money at a friend’s house shortly after I was weaned,” he remarked drily.

“Yes, but you were always brilliant, weren’t you?”

Guy suddenly realised that, if he were to succeed in his object, he must keep his temper. He pulled himself together with an effort.

“Lionel, don’t be a brute! I won’t call on you again.”

“I intend to see to that. And you may as well understand that you’re not going to call on me now.”

Lionel laughed tonelessly, and the sound grated on Guy’s ears.

For a few moments there was a silence. Then suddenly Lionel broke it.

“You’ve been getting three hundred a year, haven’t you?”

“Yes.”

“I can afford to give you just half that amount until the bonds are recovered.”

“What!”

Guy could not restrain the exclamation of dismay. Everything seemed to be going against him, everything seemed to be combining to thwart him. Lionel’s voice, as cold as ice, broke in on his thoughts:

“I mean what I say. I am not nearly so well off as I thought I should be. I am being generous as it is.”

“Generous!” Guy laughed a little wildly. “Generous!

You’ve got a funny idea of generosity, haven’t you? It’s not as if I was asking you for a present of the money, Lionel; I’m only asking for a loan.”

“On the security of the bonds?”

“Yes.”

“Hasn’t it struck you,” said Lionel very deliberately, “that for all we know at present those bonds may never be recovered?”

“But Mr. Weir said he couldn’t believe that we should not find them.”

“Is Weir infallible?”

Something in the tone of voice in which Lionel pronounced the words infuriated Guy. For a moment he saw red, lost complete control of himself.

“You damned…swine!”

He hissed the words rather than spoke them, let them pass his lips slowly, yet with a wealth of intensity. He half crouched in his chair, restrained himself from springing at his brother and burying his fingers in his throat with difficulty. It required only a tiny spark more to set alight a bonfire of madness in his brain, to render him temporarily homicidal.

Then, just as suddenly as it had come upon him the spasm passed. He

took out his handkerchief and wiped the sweat from his brow. He threw away his half-smoked cigarette, and found his fingers were shaking. When he spoke, his voice was uncertain, seemed almost to be coming from someone else, someone outside himself.

“Can you let me have a hundred on account, Lionel? I tell you it’s terribly important. I’ve got to settle that debt by next week at latest.”

For a long minute Lionel stared at his brother. Then he spoke, and his words were final:

“In the ordinary course of events you will find the sum of thirty-seven pounds, ten shillings credited to your account at the beginning of next quarter.”

“You refuse?”

“Please understand once and for all that I do not intend to subsidize your gambling.”

Abruptly Guy rose from his chair and walked rather un-steadily to the door. He turned the handle mechanically, and opened it. Standing in the opening, he turned and faced Lionel who had not moved.

“All right, Lionel.” Inwardly, Guy was surprised at the steadiness of his voice. He pronounced the words coldly, with no hint of the fury which was in his soul. “All right, Lionel. You hold all the cards now, but, by Heaven, if ever I get the chance I’ll get even with you for this!”

He banged the door behind him.

A faint smile came over Lionel’s face. For a moment he continued to sit motionless, staring at the floor in front of him, lost in his thoughts.

One thing was clear at the outset. He must wait a little longer. Guy could not yet be in bed, and it was essential that he should be entirely alone for his work. He took out his pocket book, removed from it a slip of paper. This he examined carefully.

The sound of someone approaching along the passage suddenly came to his ears. He looked up and listened attentively; there could be no doubt that someone was approaching the door. Quickly he returned the slip to the pocket book, and the book to his pocket.

The door opened and Weir put his head into the room.

“What! Still up, Lionel? I thought I saw a light coming under the door. Working?”

The Professor came into the room. He presented a curious spectacle, clad in pajamas with an old faded dressing-gown covering them. He was wearing slippers of a violent hue, and his hair was slightly tousled.

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry to disturb you, but I wonder if you know where I can find the second volume of this work?

I’ve looked in the library and I can’t find it. Very interesting. Professor Baltensbergen on diatoms and infusoria.”

Lionel felt a sense of relief. He had been surprised, not a little taken aback, by the identity of his visitor. The Professor had a curious power of making him feel ill at ease.

But the explanation of Weir’s presence had come so glibly and was so typical of the man that his suspicions were at once allayed.

“It sounds too interesting for words! No, I’m afraid I haven’t a notion where you can find it.”

“Well, well, it doesn’t matter.”

The Professor retired towards the door.

“I’ll find it in the morning. Good night, Lionel.”

“Good night, Mr. Weir.”

Lionel listened to the sound of the old man’s footsteps retreating down the passage. When he could hear them no more, he looked at his watch. He had determined to start his activities in precisely five minutes.

Those five minutes seemed to him to last more like five hours. He could not deny to himself that he felt nervous.

He had no doubt that he would be successful in his object, but the mere thought of the possibility of being observed by someone before he had completed his task was sufficient to worry him very considerably.

He looked at his watch again. With a sigh of relief he saw that the five minutes had elapsed. He rose from his chair quickly, moved to the door, and put his hand on the knob. There he paused.

He realised that he had very nearly committed a serious error. Putting out his hand he switched off the lights and then opened the door.

The passage was in complete darkness. Lionel knew the house so well, however, that he required no light to guide him. He made his way along the passage to the hall, making no sound.

Here he found that the fire had not completely died down, and that a faint light, a sort of dusk, made it possible for him to make out the shapes of the various pieces of furniture in the room.

Now that he had started he did not hesitate. He moved over to the large bookcase, and ran his fingers lightly over the framework. Not one inch of the wood passed untouched by his hand. Nothing happened.

Lionel opened the bookcase. The catch made a slight noise, and he stopped dead, standing motionless, listening intently.

But he could hear nothing, and he bent to his task again.

Just for one moment he delayed to wipe the perspiration from his forehead; he had just passed through rather a bad second.

He ran his fingers lightly over the books, but could find no irregularity. He began to take them out singly, replacing one as he removed another. This process took him some time.

Then, suddenly, he found a book which he could not move.

He tried the next one, and the next one after that. All three remained firmly stuck together, as well as the following four.

Lionel, his fingers shaking with excitement, pressed against every exposed inch in turn. At last something gave very slightly under the pressure. All the seven covers swung outwards, stuck together and working on a hinge.

A steel door came into view, about six inches high and a foot long. But now the rest was all plain sailing. Lionel found what he had expected to find… a combination lock. He thought of that slip of paper in his pocket, of the word written thereon. He wasted no more time, but

twisted the dial quickly; a second later and the door opened.

Lionel inserted his hand, felt in the safe, and extracted a bundle of papers. These he examined quickly by the light of a match. He paused just for a moment, to wonder that a small bundle of papers could be worth so much, could be worth fifteen thousand pounds. Then he put them away in the inside pocket of his coat.

Working rapidly now, he shut the safe and replaced the swinging books. He closed the bookcase and walked over to the fireplace, stood with his back to it and lit a cigarette.

He smiled to himself; the task had been easier than he had dared to hope it would be. He had the money, the bonds that would clear him of the worries which had never really left him for the past few years. He could pay now, pay his debts; or better still, perhaps fly the country and start again with this new capital. To his brother or his sister he gave no thought.

Suddenly something moved in the far corner of the room, near the staircase. Lionel stook stock still, a cold fear breaking over him. Then abruptly he pulled himself together.

Nerves, just nerves. He had just been through a worrying few minutes and his eyes were tired. Or perhaps the fire-light was playing tricks with him. He laughed to himself.

There it was again. This time the sweat broke out in great beads upon his forehead. There could be no mistake: Lionel knew, beyond all shadow of doubt, that someone, or something, was in that room with him.

“Who’s there?”

It was more of a croak than a cry, for something was at his throat, something which jerked him off his feet and seemed to cut into his flesh, something which was cold as ice. He tried to tear it away with his hands, but it was useless.

Sir Lionel Peregrine pitched forward on to his face, and lay as still as death.

IV

Upstairs, in her little sitting-room, Joan smiled at Mark Thorold.

“Mark,” she laughed, “you really are a disgrace! Here you are, keeping me up to all hours and just chattering away about nothing in particular!”

She yawned and stretched out her arms, bringing her hands together behind her head in such a manner that they formed a cushion.

Mark watched her through half closed eyes. It seemed to him that never had he seen a creature so utterly desirable.

Her frail beauty, a perfection in feature enhanced by a gentle diffusion of colour with which cosmetics had obviously had nothing to do, was set off exquisitely by her attitude.

Her figure, slight yet not too slight, appeared to him the embodiment of grace, even to the slim ankles. He sat up suddenly.

“Joan,” he said earnestly, “I’d like to ask you a question.

You may think it impertinent of me, but all the same I’d value your opinion on it.”

The girl smiled, but more for her own satisfaction than for his.

“Well?”

“Do you think that, provided a man can just afford to keep the girl whom he loves, he is justified in asking her to marry him if she has been accustomed to a life of …well, almost of luxury?”

Joan laughed lightly.

“What odd questions you do ask me, Mark! Why, that would depend entirely on the girl. Provided that the man was honest with the girl and told her exactly what to expect, and then she married him with her eyes open, I can’t see that she can have any grumble afterwards.”

For a moment Mark did not answer; then he also smiled.

“I suppose you’re right,” he said, “but it’s a hard thing to do.”

“What? Confess your poverty?”

“Yes.”

For a moment there was a silence between them. Then the girl looked up:

“Are you thinking of making this confession to some girl?”

Just for a second Mark hesitated: Then: “Yes, I am.”

Joan settled herself comfortably in her chair.

“Well, since you find it so difficult perhaps you’d better have a rehearsal. I’ll act as your confessor !”

She waited for a moment, anxious to see whether Mark would fall in with her suggestion. His first words showed that he was ready to enter into the spirit of her proposal.

“Dearest, I am a poor man but I shall be rich if only you will love me!”

She looked at him, a surprised expression on her face.

“Why? Is she so very rich?”

Mark laughed.

“I don’t think she’s got a bean,” he said.

“In that case aren’t you talking nonsense?”

“I meant to imply that just in the possession of her love I should be richer than all other men.”

“Oh, very pretty! But I’m afraid that won’t do in these days, you know,” Joan smiled. “The modern miss doesn’t care a rap for sentiment. I think you’d probably only make her feel sick. You mustn’t make the girl you love feel sick just as you are proposing to her!”

Mark rose to his feet.

“Very well. I’ll try again. Dearest, I am in love with you!

I have no money, no prospects unless Mr. Weir leaves me all his wealth which is unlikely since I am only his private secretary. I can, however, offer you a home in his house, provided you would pay your way by doing the house-keeping. It would, of course, only be a room on the third floor, back.”

“D’you know, honestly, I think I’d prefer to feel sick!”

“I am a poor man but if—”

Joan threw out her hands towards him.

“Heavens! Don’t start again!”

“But I thought you said that you preferred it?”

“Yes, but she mightn’t.”

Mark suddenly took her hand in his.

“Joan,” he said quietly, “you know it’s you I want to please…”

The girl rose to her feet.

“Mark dear,” she said softly, “please go to bed now. I’m terribly tired, and it really is awfully late.”

As if in confirmation of her words, the clock in the hall could be heard chiming out the hour of midnight. The girl and the youth looked at each other for a few seconds without speaking. Mark understood something of the girl’s desire, realised that she wished to answer the question which she must know was to come at a time to be chosen by her. Something in the way she looked at him made him understand her, gave him perhaps some measure of hope that when eventually she would allow him to ask it of her, the answer to that question would be in his favour.

He yielded to a sudden impulse and raised her fingers to his lips. When he looked up he thought he recognised an infinite tenderness in her eyes. He longed to take her in his arms, to find her unresisting and to crush that sweet red mouth to his. But he knew that would be madness. Better far to wait, to let her take her time.

“Good night, Joan.”

“Good night, Mark, and thank you, my dear.”

She said the last words so softly that he scarcely heard them, but they were more than enough by way of recompense to him. Mark made his way along the passage to his own room thankful that he had managed to keep his head.

Left alone, Joan moved through the communicating door into her

bedroom but she did not immediately undress. She had so much to think about, so much to decide. She sat down for a moment on the couch, sat down and wondered why on earth she had stopped Mark Thorold, why on earth she had not allowed him to express his love. She did not doubt what her answer would be, did not doubt it for a second. Thoughts flew through her small head, tumbled pellmell in their haste for expression, left her bewildered.

Twenty minutes later she realised that she had no hope of going immediately to sleep. She was still tired, but the desire for slumber seemed to have left her. She decided to have recourse to a book, to read a little in the hope that by taking her mind off the happenings of the day she might perhaps enveigle sleep to take her unawares. She looked around for a book.

There wasn't one in the room. An expression of annoyance escaped her; she perceived that she had left the novel she was reading down in the hall. For a moment she hesitated, wondering whether it were worth while going down to fetch it. Then she realised that without its help she could scarcely hope for sleep and that decided her. She stepped out into the passage.

Everything was in pitch darkness. Joan looked back into her room and saw the candle resting on her dressing table.

She retraced her steps, lit it, and returned to the door. She passed through into the passage.

She did not really require the light to guide her, for she knew every inch of the way to the hall. But something about the inky darkness of the night had been unpleasant, almost held a menace. Involuntarily she thought of the story of the Reaper, the story which the old professor had told them all that evening just before she had come upstairs, told them so effectively and seemed to delight in the telling. She could not banish a mental picture of the luckless thief, lying bleeding on the ground at the feet of her infuriated ancestor, his head half severed from his body.

The girl laughed a trifle nervously. She called herself a fool to think of such things, particularly at that moment.

But, the nearer she came to the hall, the more vivid did this picture seem to be before her eyes. At the top of the stairs she stopped.

She looked down. The light of the fire had practically gone; she could scarcely see to the bottom of the stairs in front of her. She held her

candle high above her head, but this made little difference.

Suddenly Joan made up her mind. She had nearly turned back, but now she took a step forward and started to descend to the hall. She was furious with herself, furious at having allowed her nerves to play such havoc with her common sense.

“What on earth can hurt you?” she asked herself almost savagely. “What in heaven’s name are you afraid of? You’re no longer a schoolgirl, you idiot!”

She almost ran down the stairs. Somehow to move quickly seemed to give her courage, to strengthen her resolve. At the back of her mind, although this she did not own even to herself, was the thought that the sooner she had got the novel, the sooner would she be back in the comfort of her cosy room. It seemed unaccountably far away just at that moment.

She reached the bottom of the stairs, moved quickly across the hall to the table where she remembered leaving the book.

But, just as she reached it, out went her candle.

Joan realised that her haste had been her undoing. She had no matches, and although she knew there must be a box somewhere in the room, she knew not in the least where to search for it. She looked over to the fire; all flame had long since gone, but the dying embers were still red. By their light she would at least be able to identify the book as hers.

She put out her hand, felt the edge of the table, and felt along its surface for the novel. Her fingers came in contact with a volume almost at once. She picked it up; it appeared to be more or less of the right size. She turned, the book in her hand, and walked over towards the fireplace.

Half way across the hall she stopped abruptly. Something seemed to have impelled her to do so, and for a moment she wondered what it could have been. She listened attentively, but there was no sound to be heard. Strangely enough she no longer felt frightened; instead there had come to her a feeling of suppressed excitement. Joan did her best, but try as she might she could not account for this sensation, a feeling tantamount almost to presentiment.

She shook it off with difficulty, took another step forward towards the fire. It was then she realised that it was her proximity to the fireplace

which repelled her. She had to force herself to advance another pace.

Her eyes were not accustomed to the gloom. The red cinders of the fire gave out a little light. As she drew near she looked downwards, in order not to approach too near the fender. For the second time she stopped, but this time she remained motionless, as if turned into stone.

There was something, a shape, lying grotesquely at her feet. Joan felt the blood run cold in her veins, felt that she would swoon. She tried to move, to run, anything to get away. But the power of her mind over her limbs seemed to have left her; she could not move. She tried to scream; only a croak came, a croak which she failed to recognise as emanating from herself.

She swayed. Something seemed to snap. She screamed.

V

The principal bedrooms of Carshalton Hall are situated at the front of the house and are on the first floor. At the window of one of these an old man sat, well concealed from observation from the outside by a judicious arrangement of the curtains of which he was rather proud, since they in no way impeded his own view of the outside world.

He kept an eagle eye on the lawn in front of him, and on the drive stretching away through the wood. He was thankful for the brightness of the moon, which made it possible for him to see some distance. Lovingly he fingered a pair of night glasses which he held ready in his right hand.

Suddenly his whole figure stiffened; he had caught sight of something, a shadow perhaps, moving or so he thought, at the edge of the wood.

The old man was interested even in shadows. The glasses flew to his eyes, and were quickly focussed.

“Great Scott!”

The exclamation escaped him involuntarily. He kept the glasses to his eyes a moment longer, stared into the darkness.

He watched the figure of a man moving furtively away from the house until he was lost among the trees and the prevailing shadows. Then slowly he lowered his hand on to the window sill.

“Who in heaven’s name was that? And where is Lionel?”

He spoke the words out loud, although they were intended only for himself. He failed to understand the situation : it had been to see someone else, someone he knew, that he had made himself sit up for this lonely vigil.

Something had gone wrong, of that he was convinced.

He had been waiting to see Sir Lionel Peregrine leave the house in just this manner, and instead he had seen a figure which he failed to recognise. Had he been right to trust so much to his own judgment? Was there somebody working with Lionel, working to despoil the younger children of their legacy?

Then, all of a sudden, a sound came to his ears which made his blood

run cold. Professor Oliver Weir leapt to his feet.

He had heard a scream, a shriek of agony, and it had come from somewhere in the house. He rushed to the door, pulled it open, and went headlong down the passage and the stairs as fast as his old legs would carry him.

VI

"Well, Inspector?"

Detective-Inspector Beamish looked up across the desk of the little study and smiled wanly.

"It's an odd case, Professor. Usually, in any murder case, the first thing we look for is a motive, and sometimes that motive is damned hard to find. But in this case nearly everyone seems to have a motive quite sufficient in itself to have prompted them to do the deed."

He looked down at the pad on which he had been writing.

"Consider the situation, Mr. Weir. Sir Lionel is found lying on the ground with his throat cut from ear to ear.

That's where we start. Now, his brother who is now Sir Guy, is known to have had a violent quarrel with him last night. I have the testimony of the old butler that when he went his rounds last thing last night, he was surprised to see a light coming from under the door of this very room. Thinking that perhaps it might have been overlooked, he came towards the room and he heard voices raised in anger. They were the voices of the murdered man and of his brother. That in itself would justify a very close investigation, almost an arrest, but…"

There was a moment's pause.

"But what?"

"We know that Mark Thorold is in love with the murdered man's sister. We know, from what Mrs. Norton has said regarding an interview she had last night with the deceased, that Sir Lionel was violently opposed to the proposed union. There is an old saying, Mr. Weir, which runs: 'Always look for the girl in the case.'"

The Inspector looked up quickly, and stared into the eyes of the Professor.

"And then there's the girl herself. She was found, by you, standing by the body, with those missing bonds in her hand."

Weir leant forward earnestly.

"Inspector," he said steadily, "surely you don't suspect that sweet girl of this foul deed?"

“I suspect everyone, Mr. Weir. Until I find the murderer I’ve got to.”

Weir sighed.

“She couldn’t have done it, surely that’s obvious? You’ve seen the gash in his throat; how on earth could a girl have the strength to inflict such a wound?”

The Inspector smiled.

“Please don’t think I want to prove her guilty, Mr. Weir!

But you must understand that I cannot allow sentiment to stand in the way of my duty. A girl could easily have done it… with a sufficiently sharp instrument. There’s another awkward point about the case; no sign of the weapon.”

“There are plenty of old swords, old claymores and things, hanging on the walls.”

“Which are not very sharp? It’s no good, Mr. Weir,”

the Inspector spoke sharply. “I’ve had a look at them all.

You’re not going to tell me that the murderer had time to clean the sword he used, replace the dust of centuries, and hang it up again before making his get-away? No! There is no sign of any weapon, and it’s a most irritating feature of the case.”

The Inspector frowned and looked down at his notes again.

It was obvious to Weir, watching him very closely, that he was worried.

“Why won’t you credit my story, Inspector?” he asked suddenly.

“I’ll credit it all right, sir,” he laughed. “Don’t think I don’t believe you. But there are plenty of poachers about these parts, and I think it was one of them that you saw. There are plenty of people already with obvious motives without dragging in an outsider who can have no motive at all. Remember what Miss Peregrine said: she found the bonds in her brother’s pocket. If the crime had been prompted by robbery, they would have been gone.”

“You believe that she was speaking the truth when she said that?”

“I do, but that doesn’t let her out, Mr. Weir. She may have known they

were there, perhaps have gone to find them."

"After he was killed?"

"After or before."

The Inspector laughed good-humouredly.

"I understand your feelings, Professor," he said. "I have them myself, you know. But... I cannot allow anything to interfere with my work."

There was a pause. Both men were thinking hard, trying to worry out the true facts from the mass of conflicting evidence.

"If only we could find that weapon!"

It was the Inspector who had spoken, almost to himself, but Weir heard him. He realised that the detective was right, that it was an absolute necessity to find it. He could not rid himself of the impression that the man he had seen the previous night, stealing through the wood so furtively, had had something to do with the tragic death of the young man whom he had suspected of fraud, certainly, but nothing more.

He understood that he regretted Lionel's death not one jot excepting where it caused such trouble to those whom he was fond of. That Lionel had intended to decamp with the money properly belonging to Guy and Joan he had not the faintest doubt, but on this he kept his own counsel, preferring to protect the family name and not drag it through the mire of an open court. He comforted himself with the reflection that the knowledge which he was withholding could not possibly help the Inspector in his investigation.

Weir looked at his watch, and noticed that it was well past noon.

"Inspector..." he began.

The words froze on his lips. A sound reached his ears, a sound which startled him. He looked abruptly at the detective, and saw that he also had heard it.

Seemingly from far away, the sound of a bell could be heard gently tolling.

"What's that?"

Weir waited until the sound had ceased before he replied.

When he did speak, the tone of his voice was very serious : “Have you heard the legend connected with this family, Inspector?”

The detective shook his head. Briefly Weir told him, stressing no point but making it all very clear. When he had finished there was a silence.

“Are you trying to make me believe that that was the Reaper’s bell?”

Weir hesitated; he knew the type of man with whom he had to deal, knew that the Inspector’s matter-of-fact brain could scarcely be expected to give any credence to such a tale.

“I’m not trying to make you believe anything,” he said.

“I’m only telling you the general belief in these parts.”

The Inspector could contain himself no longer; he burst into great peals of laughter. His mind, trained by his police work to make deductions from what he saw and to exclude most rigidly all else, found it most humorous that such a round-about and fantastic explanation should be given for the ordinary ringing of a bell. He wiped away the tears of mirth which had gathered in his eyes.

“That’s a beauty, Mr. Weir! A real beauty!”

Weir was annoyed. The sound of that bell had a tone which he had never heard before; there was something ethereal about it, something of foreboding. But a moment’s reflection was sufficient to make him realise that he could scarcely expect any other reception to the story from the representative of the law. Yet.

“You’d better warn Sir Guy! He’s the head of the house now.”

The Inspector spoke the words in a bantering manner. The Professor looked up sharply, to find the man’s steel blue eyes fixed upon him. He made up his mind.

“You’re staying to lunch, Inspector ?”

“Thank you, Mr. Weir. If it is convenient, I should like to.”

“Of course it is convenient. Anything that we can do to hasten the discovery of the truth we shall make convenient.

You will not waste time if you stay here. You must remember, Inspector, that several of us, of the family, are under suspicion. We should like our names cleared as soon as—”

Weir stopped in the middle of his sentence. He leapt to his feet, rushed to the door. But Detective-Inspector Beamish, surprisingly active for his great size, was before him and halfway down the passage to the hall before he even reached the door. For the second time within twelve hours, Professor Weir had been rudely startled by a scream, a shriek of such soulful agony that it made the blood curdle in his veins, the sweat break out upon his forehead.

He reached the hall not far behind Beamish. The sight that met his eyes staggered him.

Guy Peregrine was lying on his back, the blood pouring from his throat. Standing as though transfixed, his sister Joan was staring at him, white as the death which was so near. At her feet, glistening in the rays of the sunlight coming through the windows, lay a blood-stained sickle.

Suddenly the girl seemed to sense their presence.

“I didn’t do it!” she screamed, and her voice grated on the old man’s ears. “I didn’t do it! I had my back turned, and I heard him choke! Oh, God, can’t you understand? When I turned round, someone threw that thing at my feet!”

For a moment no one moved. Then the girl slowly looked up, until she was staring at the picture over her head, the picture of the Reaper.

“He must have done it!”

The voice was so low that Beamish and Weir could only just hear her. For an appreciable space of time neither said a word. Then the Inspector advanced rapidly across the room.

“An admirable suggestion! If I may say so, very likely indeed.” His voice was harsh. “You come along with me, my girl!”

VII

Weir turned abruptly from the window. He had watched the car until it was lost to sight down the drive, the car in which Beamish was removing Joan Peregrine from her ancestral home on a charge of murder. A sense of overwhelming disaster afflicted him, a feeling that with Joan's departure had gone all the happiness out of his life. Outside the sun was shining brilliantly, as if to mock him. Inside all was in shadow, more in keeping with his mood.

He looked across the room at Julia Norton. She presented a pathetic picture, her head bowed down, her whole attitude depicting the anguish which was in her soul. He caught his breath, sharply, almost viciously: "It cannot be!" He paused. "It shall not be!"

Mrs. Norton looked up.

"What's the use of saying that, Oliver?" There was a touch of hopelessness in her voice. "You heard what Beamish said."

"That fool!"

Mrs. Norton shrugged her shoulders.

"Fool or no fool, he's the one in authority. He said quite plainly that the girl was guilty, and that any jury would convict. Think of it! She was found with both her brothers, found alone with their poor mutilated bodies."

Weir snorted.

"The victim of cruel circumstances!"

"Possibly. But, to complete his case, there was a motive. With Lionel and Guy both out of the way, the next male heir is the only cousin, Mark Thorold. We know that Joan was going to marry Mark. And Mark Thorold, by his inheritance, is, as her husband, the only means whereby the girl could remain as mistress of Carshalton Hall, of the house she loves!"

"Far-fetched!"

Mrs. Norton sighed.

"I agree, Oliver, far-fetched to you and I. But perhaps not to twelve men both good and true...oh, it's awful!"

Julia Norton broke down completely. The Professor moved over to her quickly, sat down beside her, took one of her unresisting hands in his. This he patted gently.

“Courage, Julia.”

More he could not think of to say. Weir, beside the well-nigh hysterical woman, found himself tongue-tied. He continued to pat the hand in his, gently pressed it.

In a few moments Julia Norton recovered herself. She sat up straight, dried her eyes with her handkerchief. She smiled heavily

“I’m sorry, Oliver. I shouldn’t have given way like that in front of you. But I can’t believe that sweet child could have committed such frightful…”

“She didn’t.” Weir said bluntly.

“But then who did?”

“I propose to find that out.”

There was definite purpose in the tone of the old Professor’s voice. Somehow it comforted Mrs. Norton as nothing else could have done. To her his announcement appeared in no way vainglorious; she had complete faith in Weir’s intelligence, whether it were applied to his everyday researches into science or to such a foreign task to him as this.

“Oliver,” she said suddenly, “that poor boy Mark is almost mad. He’s tearing his hair… .”

“Tell him to refrain,” remarked Weir shortly, “he may want it later.”

“How can you joke today! Please listen to me! I don’t know what to do with him; he wants to go and murder the policeman!”

“Now look here, Julia, I know the boy is badly hit, and no wonder! But he’s your job; for heaven’s sake don’t let him come and disturb me at this juncture!”

Weir had spoken sharply, and his words had their effect on Mrs. Norton.

“Oh, I know, Oliver,” she paused. “I … I should like to tell you something.”

The Professor waited patiently for her to speak. His instinct told him that she was finding it difficult, but that a little indulgence would be well worth the while.

The words came to Mrs. Norton with a rush : “I didn’t dare to tell the Inspector. I thought he’d just laugh at me! But … Oliver, last night after I had spoken to Lionel in the study, I made my way back to my room in the dark. As I was ascending the stairs, I suddenly heard a

a… oh, it was horrible!”

“What did you hear?”

“I heard a bell, Oliver, a bell tolling in the distance, a bell exactly like the Reaper’s bell!”

Weir jumped from the sofa to his feet, and stood facing Mrs. Norton.

“When did you hear this bell?”

“When I was going back to my room, I tell you. It must have been nearly midnight.”

“Thank God!”

Mrs. Norton stared at the Professor, almost unable to believe her ears.

“Thank you,” she said curtly, “that the fact of my being terrified out of my wits should constitute a reason to express gratitude to the Almighty fills me with joy.”

Weir laughed.

“Julia,” he smiled, “forgive me but don’t ask questions. You misunderstand me. Now please run off to Mark and keep him quiet; I may need him later, and if I do he will have to be as nearly at his best as possible. Where is he now?”

“Upstairs in his room, I think.”

“Go and find him. And don’t let anybody disturb me for a little while.”

Mrs. Norton rose obediently. She moved towards the stairs, but stopped half way.

“You’ll excel yourself, won’t you, Oliver? Remember, the happiness of those two young people rests in your hands.”

“I shall do my best. Of that you may be sure.”

Weir answered gruffly. He had a horror for sentiment of any sort, and Mrs. Norton’s words seemed to him to reek of sentiment. Of course he would do his best!

He went out into the garden, and walked a little way. He saw a garden seat in front of him, and sat down upon it.

The sun was still high in the heavens, and still sufficiently warm to make him forget the absence of his coat.

“Somebody is monkeying with the legend!” he said to himself. “Somebody is hiding behind it, and that somebody is not Joan. When Julia heard that bell, Joan was rehearsing a proposal with Mark. Oh, thank the Lord for that!”

He rubbed his hands together; then suddenly became serious.

“Now, let me see. I have established that on two occasions a bell was rung, a bell which was supposed to be the Reaper’s.

Nobody in the house could have done it; therefore someone outside did. What about my friend of the wood? Very probably. This bell was heard inside the house; it wasn’t rung inside the house, therefore it must have been rung very near the house to have been heard inside so softly. Where? Now, to be seen ringing a bell would be to ask for trouble. An out-house? The garden shed! Gosh, yes! The sickle! That was the sickle in the garden shed.”

He was on his feet in an instant, running for all he was worth towards the house end of the garden, where the shed was situated. He burst through the door, and looked about him. The sickle was no longer in its accustomed place.

“Ha!”

Weir put a wealth of triumph into the single syllable. Then he looked around him for something else, something he would have given half his life to find. There was nothing even like a bell anywhere in the shed.

His eyes came to rest on a long iron bar. For a moment he remained motionless, staring at the bar, racking his memory for something which he knew was there, something which he could not summon to the forefront of his mind.

“Gas!”

The single word escaped him. He remembered now reading it in the papers during the war. On several occasions a suspended piece of iron had been used as a gas alarm, to give out a bell-like tone.

The Professor lifted up the bar, held it at arm’s-length.

Very gingerly he struck it with a smaller piece of metal which was lying handy. The sound of the Reaper’s bell reached his ears as if from a great distance.

“Back to the seat!” Weir was speaking to himself again.

“Back to the seat! I must think!”

He hurried back, sat down again, and buried his head in his hands:

“Not the gardener? Of course not! Now don’t lose your head in your excitement! Steady, you old sleuth! What was it that Beamish said? Always look for the motive. Now, who benefits? Joan indirectly through Mark. Joan out. Mark?

He didn’t ring the bell. Out too, thank God. But who else?

The estate of course. It wouldn’t have done too well with Lionel or Guy in charge, but an estate can’t commit two murders. Then gosh!”

The Professor sat bolt upright. An idea had come to him, an idea so fantastic that he scarcely liked to credit it. Then, little by little, he realised it fitted, fitted admirably. The man had always struck him as a little mad, the family had worked for the estate through many generations, and than anyone else, the man must know all about the legend.

“Ha!”

Again a wealth of triumph crept into the monosyllable.

“But I must be sure. How can I make sure?”

For a long minute he sat motionless. Then, abruptly, he rose from his seat. He cast a quick glance to the sky: clouds were rolling up, soon the late autumn sun would cease to warm the earth for another day.

He hurried to the house, put on a hat and overcoat, and started to walk briskly down the drive.

VIII

Weir turned in through the little wooden gate of the cottage near the Lodge. He walked up the gravel path, and, unhesitating, knocked at the door. A moment later it was opened to him.

“Ah! Good evening, Morland.”

“Good evening, Mr. Weir.”

There was a pause. Weir looked at the man in front of him, the agent to the estate, noted the high cheek bones, the bright but sunken eyes, the unhealthy pallor of the face.

All these things he noted mentally.

“May I come in for a moment?”

Just for a second Morland hesitated. Then he stepped aside.

“Certainly.”

Weir passed him, and went into the little living-room.

Morland followed.

“Will you sit down?”

“Thank you.”

Morland took a silver box from the sideboard.

“Cigarette?”

“Thank you, no.”

“D’you mind if I do?”

Weir smiled.

“Of course not.”

He watched the man take out a cigarette from the box, and light it with a match. His actions, to Weir, seemed nervous, seemed jerky. The Professor noted, not without a little thrill of excitement, that the man’s hand was unsteady, that the match shook ever so little in his fingers.

“Yes, Mr. Weir?”

Morland had seated himself in front of Weir, on the other side of a table.

“I’ve come to see you about about the estate. Of …course, Sir Mark should really be doing it, but you can imagine his condition at the moment.”

“Why? He didn’t care for his cousins, did he?”

The question startled Weir.

“Eh? Well, I don’t know. But it’s not that. You know they’ve arrested Miss Joan?”

“Arrested Miss Joan? Whatever for?”

“The murder of her brothers.”

“What!”

The exclamation was barked out. Weir noticed that Morland was even more pale than usual, that his eyes were almost unduly bright. He suddenly felt acutely uncomfortable.

“She was going to marry Mark,” he said simply.

The other did not answer him for a moment. When he did, his words could scarcely be heard: “This will never do!”

Weir jumped on them at once.

“Of course it won’t. We are sure we--who know Joan--that she is incapable of these ghastly crimes. But the police hold a different view. I don’t think one can blame them. They have a clear case against her, even though it is absurd from our point of view. But it must be stopped.”

“Yes, it must be stopped.”

“How can we do it?” Weir paused for a moment to let his words sink in. “I think we’d better have a conference. I’m asking Detective-Inspector Beamish to come up to the house at six. You’ll come, of course. We must convince him of Joan’s innocence.”

“I’ll come.”

Weir smiled to himself. He felt relieved; he had not thought that Morland would have consented to come with such little persuasion. And Morland's presence that night was an essential.

"Good. At six precisely, then."

Weir got up to leave. Morland accompanied him to the door.

"It's a terrible business," remarked the Professor, "a terrible business!"

"Not so bad as all that, surely?"

"Eh?"

Weir turned round sharply. Morland was smiling at him; somehow to smile just then struck the old man so strange.

"Mark Thorold will make a fine laird."

"Yes." Weir fell in with the other's mood. "Yes, he will.

But for three to inherit within twenty-four hours!"

"Two worthless men, Dr. Weir, who would have done nothing except harm to Carshalton. Think of it! Think of this wondrous place, allowed to go to rack and ruin through neglect! Trees raised to the ground, and sold to provide cash to squander. The place mortgaged, probably; or, worse still, sold. That I could not have borne!"

Weir looked at the agent. Something which he saw seemed to give him infinite satisfaction.

"Yes, yes. Perhaps all these things turn out for the best after the first shock has worn off. I'll see you at six, then?"

"Yes."

Weir made off at once to the village post office. He put through a call to London, and had not long to wait.

"Yes? Is that Sir Joseph Bryan's house? May I speak to him. Thank you."

He waited for a moment.

"Hullo? Is that you, Bryan? Oliver Weir at this end. Don't ask questions, just answer. If a man is mad on one subject only, could

something bring on the madness if it were an integral part of his moments of madness, so to speak. Yes, something that always happens when he is mad. Yes, yes. It would? Good. Thank you so much, old man. Goodbye."

The old Professor left the post office and made for the police station with a light step. Sir Joseph Bryan, old friend and famous mental specialist, had done much to soothe the awful anxiety of the last few hours.

IX

The Professor beamed upon his small audience. Mrs. Norton sat on his left, as she had done the previous evening in the study. On his right sat Mark Thorold, pale but composed. Just in front of him a candle rested on a small table, giving the only light in the room.

“I apologise for the lack of light,” the Professor was smiling benignly as he was speaking, “but the fact is that the lights have fused...not surprising after the recent events in this room.”

He paused. He looked at Beamish sitting opposite, at Morland, the agent, beside him.

“But I like candles, don’t you?”

Weir shot the question at Morland, and at the same time watched him closely.

“Why?”

The Professor smiled.

“I doubt whether it would interest you. Candles are so different one from the other; one burns brightly from start to finish, another flutters and dies out before it has burnt halfway. It’s a question of their quality, their worth.”

He paused again.

Now that he had come to the great moment, the old man was almost afraid to put his theory to the test. What if it failed him? What if Joan remained in that prison cell-to face her trial, a trial which could only end in one way?

The sweat was breaking out upon his forehead in great beads. Weir made a physical effort, took a grip of himself.

It would never do to fail now, to fail the girl he had learnt to love. He seemed to see before him in the darkness, the face of her dead father, pleading, pleading with him not to fail.

Weir looked around him. The small ring of anxious faces peered at him, seemed to be hanging on his words.

Suddenly he spoke. In a low voice, his eyes half closed, his expression one almost of a person in a trance, yet the words came clearly to those four people sitting round him.

“The Reaper was riding round his fields and suddenly came across a man who was cutting some of the ripe corn with the evident intention of stealing it. They argued; the man dared to be rude, to be abusive, whereupon the Reaper, snatching from the man’s grasp the sickle …”

He stopped abruptly. In the silence which ensued no sound could be heard.

As if from a great distance, the sound of a bell came to their ears. For a moment nothing happened; then Morland leapt to his feet.

“What’s that?”

His voice was hoarse, his eyes were shining in the half light. He was staring at Weir with an intensity which the Professor could almost feel.

“It is the Reaper’s bell, tolling for the death of two Peregrines and of their murderer!”

Weir spoke the words deliberately, in a voice of thunder.

But even he was scarcely prepared for the result which at-tended them.

Slowly, almost with a conscious determination which sickened those watching him, Morland began to move his right hand. The fingers were crooked, resembled nothing so much as a claw as he raised them to the level of his throat. He let out a hiss as his hand touched his throat, a hiss of such diabolical malignancy that Weir recoiled in his seat quite involuntarily.

Then, in a low tone which nevertheless carried to the ears of all his listeners, Morland began to speak. He was mad, obviously mad. But there was such dignity in his bearing, such a wealth of sincerity apparent in his voice, that even Detective-Inspector Beamish hesitated to interrupt him: “Yes, I killed them. I have done my work, been faithful to my trust! Carshalton Hall shall not be mortgaged by Sir Lionel nor sold by Sir Guy! I have been faithful to the Reaper, faithful to his law!”

Beamish rose from his seat.

“I arrest …”

“No!” Morland’s voice rose to a scream. “What I have done I have done well. I was the instrument of Destiny, and to you, Mark Thorold, on Destiny’s behalf I now commit this corner of England. All it has been, all it will be, it is all yours. Be worthy of your trust, you and your people. I have done my duty and saved Carshalton. No tribunal shall arraign me, no bewigged fools shall indict me. I go on my journey!”

There was a moment of stupefied silence. There had been something almost grand in the poor demented creature's farewell, perhaps because of its transparent sincerity. Morland took advantage of this moment of paralysis.

Like a flash he was across the room and at the foot of the stairs. Beamish was the first to recover, the first to follow.

But he was much too late; Morland rushed up the stairs. The first floor window was open before him: Morland took it in his stride.

“Yes, my dear,” the Professor linked his arm through Mrs. Norton’s. “I thought I could trust Thomas, being a butler, to be punctual. The rest merely meant an accurate synchronisation of our watches. But I must say I think I timed it rather well; how awful if I hadn’t finished when he rang the bell!”

The old man wiped his spectacles.

“Come into the study, my dear. She’ll be back in a minute and… we’d better leave the stage clear for Mark, don’t you think?”

He sighed. But there are sighs and sighs. This one contained a hint of tiredness, a hint of pride, a hint of pleasure.

THE END

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